


Folk Theatres, Oral Poetry and Cultural Artifacts along the Border Regions of North Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Contested border regions often become “memory landscapes” with monuments, historical sites, and cultural artefacts; they become sacred spaces for national or ethnic memory. In some cases, border regions can take on a dramatic theatrical character in which specific national interpretations of past conflict and the culpability of the other side are carefully staged. This is particularly the case of Cooch Behar district. Martyrs from past conflicts are “reanimated”, at appropriate times for the strategy of social mobilization. Such changing cultural expressions can be traced to the growth and evolution of the indigenous art forms of Cooch Behar. The successive waves of migration and a shift in the demographic in the later decades of the last century have resulted in the emergence of a very syncretic cultural scene, one that is informed by both migrant narratives, while paying due diligence to the indigenous roots of the art forms. This chapter aims to evaluate orality not as a static medium but as one that is subject to constant change resulting in cultural transition. This paper highlights the history of border planning and population division in the region of North Bengal is fraught with religious tension, transition from a principality to a constituting state in the case of Cooch Behar and an overarching sense of loss that is prevalent across the whole region of North Bengal. Midnight’s borders that were arbitrarily drawn in Undivided Punjab and Bengal in 1947 had wreaked havoc in the lives of people occupying the border adjacent districts, an impact that can still be felt in the mnemocultural productions of these districts.

Keywords: *Memory, Border, Relocation, Theatre, Performance.*

Introduction

Cultures and indigenous cultures and monocultures to be precise are never devoid of the material underpinnings of the society that they manifest themselves in. In the decades following

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the independence, the shifting parameters of the literary representation of trauma and post-memory have become more and more prominent, reasons of which are varied and disparate. The socialist ethos of the Postcolonial Indian Republic have proved to be inadequate for bringing out the people of the border regions of North Bengal out of the grips of poverty and misery. This should not be seen as the failure of socialist theory but as a disappointing result of inefficient praxis.

Socio-political Milieu of the Border Regions of North Bengal

However sad the socio-economic condition of the border regions of North Bengal, might be, indigenous cultures have held their sway over the collective psyche of the people of North Bengal. The lives of people inhabiting the border regions of North Bengal were beset by multiple problems, such as: Enclave Problem, Adverse Possession Problem and No Man's Land Problem, which took quite a few decades to solve and till that happened, these people have suffered and paid a heavy socio-economic price. Such moods of despondency and economic marginalization have impacted the nature and the process behind the creation and oral narratives, narratives that are mostly comprised of oral poetry and folk theatres, which as discussed in the previous section, remain mostly unscripted and rely on the mnemonic registers of the performers and participants.

Relevance of the Folk Theatres

In the realm of folk-theaters in North Bengal Bishohari Puja occupies the prime focus of popular rendition. The ballads and devotional songs sung in these rituals are the sources from which the folk-theatres emanate from. They make it possible for the audiences to situate these folk theatres within the indigenous belief systems which are markedly different from the scriptural faith. The reasons behind observing the Bishohari Puja are as follows:

- The songs are composed and sung mainly because it is believed that they push the householder towards prosperity and material gains.
- Some people observe the Bishohari Puja, because they want to be blessed with healthy babies, some people pray for decent jobs.
- In some parts of North Bengal, Bishohari Puja is observed on the occasion of Seasonal Harvest of Crops, which is celebrated as Nabanno in the Bengali calendar. It is a big event in

the rural agriculture based societies and lifestyles of North Bengal and many householders pray to Manasa on this occasion with much aplomb and gusto.

- The householders organizing this puja have to abstain from consuming any sort of non-vegetarian food as long as the puja is going on their house. This is done to ensure class similarities and pious devotion as the singers and the performers of the folk-theatres encompassing Bishohari Puja also eat vegetarian foods on those days. On the last day of the Puja, the owner of the house fasts along with the Gayens (minstrels and singers specializing in folk-ballads) to ensure that the Puja is done with utmost devotion and sincerity. This is one of the main purposes.

The puja is divided into two main parts, namely the devotional songs and the performance of plays, which are essentially part of the folk-theatres. The songs are of older origin and compared to them, the folk-theatres are relatively recent creations. The singers are called Geedals in the districts of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri, while in Maldah and the Dinajpurs, they are called Gayens. Such heterogeneous nomenclature of performers, in different districts, who are essentially practicing the same craft points to the fluid nature of the Bishohari Puja, which are not bound in rigid conventionality and are open to subjective interpretations and regional variations.

These folk theatres have spawned a whole host of oral poetry and they are equally rich in spiritual quality and piety. For the convenience of discussion, we are going to look at the oral poetry that has directly originated from Bishohari Puja. Fuleshwari Sapuriya Murder is a popular pala (particular scene in any theatrical production) in North Bengal. It has the following lines:

Shono Mago Bishohari Mago Manasa (Listen to our prayers, Goddess Manasa)

Duhate minit kori dhori tomar paa (We prostrate before you)

Ekhani pukurer charkhani ghaat (Our pond has four barges)

Tate janmilo padmar paat (Lotuses bloomed in that pond)

Padmat jonme Padmakumari (On those Lotuses were born, Padmakumari)

Baap-maaye naam rakhe Joi Bishohari (Her parents named her Bishohari)

These verses show that the poems and renditions are all deeply entrenched in agricultural sensibilities and they show the pious and devotional relationship that the villagers share with

their indigenous, animistic deities. These poems are examples of the perennial popularity and continued relevance of oral narratives, most of which have been passed down from one generation to the next in an organic nature.

The main composers of the folk-theatres in North Bengal are Tandrabibhuti, Jagatjibon Ghoshal & Jibonkrishno Moitra. The first two of these three, were born in the rural plains of North Bengal in the seventeenth century. They composed their poetic versions of Manasamangal, a perennial classic of Bengali literature, composed in the middle centuries of the last millennium. The themes of their poetic creations were deeply spiritual and pandered to the sensibilities of the indigenous population here at North Bengal. It is from these tomes that the stories of modern day Bishohari Puja have been collected and finessed to perfection. It is a bit surprising that people are still referring to this works as spiritual touchstones, even after all this time. It is a testament to the poetic grandeur of these works and the sustainable nature of the oral narratives. The folk theatres make gracious and plentiful usage of these poetic works and slightly tweak the plot in favour of regional variations and contextual sensitivity. These folk-theatres also see the participation of local Muslims, another feature that brings out the culturally syncretic nature of North Bengal and its pluralistic ethos, that have survived the Partition of the Indian sub-continent.

The Radcliffe Line: Inception of Border Crisis in North Bengal

Cyril Radcliffe was the chief architect and the brains behind the geographical bi-furcation of Undivided India. Here was a man tasked with the transference of heterogeneous population in India, a country that had more or less assimilated its various ethnic and religious groups into a unified whole, or so it seemed until the 1940s, when communal frenzy and hateful sectarian violence brought out centuries-old political and religious insecurities and paved the way for the division of this country, a thought so alien in the collective psyche of the Indian population that most people were not even willing to take it seriously. Radcliffe was never meant to be an administrator; he was not even a cartographer. Yet, the British Raj appointed him with carving up this nation and the results were diabolical and catastrophic. Armed only with tentative revenue maps that showed nothing more than the limits of taxable districts and taluks, Radcliffe set about this mammoth task with indifference and haste. He only had thirty six days to accomplish his mission of dividing up the nation, which meant that he never had enough time to visit the rural stretches of the undivided Punjab and Bengal. He operated from the seat of the British Raj in Delhi, never even bothered to come to Kolkata, so it would be somewhat

fallacious and naïve to expect him to visit North Bengal and take stalk of the situation. The ramifications of such con-job proved to be too bloody and gory for the rural people of these two provinces, especially Hindus and Muslims who found themselves on the wrong sides of the Radcliffe line and overnight lost most of their economic resources and landholdings. This precipitated a decades' long migrant crisis, especially in the Bengal section of the Radcliffe Line, as the borders here are porous and the transference of population was never absolute unlike in the undivided Punjab province. North Bengal bears the burden of such migrant crisis to this day and the colonial apathy of the administrators and their Indian collaborators are on of the chief reasons to blame for this.

Further evidences of lackluster policy-making and its shoddy implementation were on display when, the Radcliffe Commission pretty much conceded that the border that they were coming up with should at best be treated as 'tentative' and the prevailing wisdom was that the two new countries would later on a later date 'agree to a mutual frontier based on people's wishes'.

After Partition, the Radcliffe Line had left a murky distinction between the newly created independent India and what was then called East Pakistan. Later, the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation war ended with East Pakistan breaking away from Pakistan and becoming an independent nation. In the aftermath of the war it was estimated that over three million people died in Bangladesh, and nearly ten million Bengali refugees crossed the border into Indian Territory. (Source: Midnight's Borders: A People's History of Modern India, 2021 by Suchitra Vijayan)

The Mutability of Crises

It would now be useful to list out the various ways in the border crisis has unfolded in the rural plains of North Bengal, which are as follows:

- Due to the negligent border planning and shoddy execution, places like Boda, Paatgram, Tetuliya, Bhurungamari, Jaldhaka and Domar were never really included in the Indian Territory. All these places were Rajbanshi dominated and they held the political sway over there and yet, these places were given to the newly formed state of Pakistan.
- The exclusion of the Tetuliya block meant that the districts like Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri got cut off from Southern Bengal; one has to traverse through Kishanganj of Bihar to actually get to Kolkata from the distant parts of North Bengal, which is a logistical nightmare.

- The Indian state would have never had to deal with the enclave crisis and territorial disputes, if places like Dimla, Hatibandha, Gaibandha and Vurumari were included in 1947 in India. This would have saved the residents of Indian Enclaves an enormous amount of grief and would have accorded them all the constitutional rights right from 1947.
- The brutal oppression and state apathy that the people of North Bengal felt since 1947 have fostered a sense of marginalization and disenchantment. This has created the problem of insurgency in North-Eastern India and the Indian state have found it very hard to contain these separatist and often violent movements in those provinces.
- The Radcliffe Line had far-reaching consequences and ramifications. It soon manifested itself into various problems like the Adverse Possession Problem, The Indo-Bangladesh Water disputes and the Teesta Water-Division Discord. It took the Indian State a significant amount of time in the late 1980s and 90s to solve these obstacles, which did not really help the economic cause of the people of North Bengal. It certainly made matters worse for the East Bengali migrants who found it incredibly hard to get an economic head start amid all these geo-political anomalies and their socio-economic fall-outs.
- In a desperate bid to keep the vast territorial area of North Bengal into India, many political leaders in the 1940s took it upon themselves to make the various tribes living here, Hindus. Before such attempts were carried out, tribes such as the Santhals, Oraons, Mundas identified as animists. In the 1941 census, all these tribes identified themselves as Hindus. Such proselytization was taken out on community level, which meant that scriptural Hinduism replaced animism and pantheism among the tribal population. This pushed the tribal people away from their indigenous culture, something that was already in dire straits.

Borders, Self-Histories, Lived Realities and Marginalization

The cataclysmic Partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947 gave birth to fractured sensibilities, divided nationalities and an over-arching sense of doom and gloom, that manifested itself in the many ways in which people had to leave their belongings and ancestral land after being evicted from the wrong side of the Radcliffe Line in 1947. For many unfortunate souls, Partition proved to be a fatal affair, one that not only snatched away their lives, but also left the survivors of their families with an unmitigated sense of loss and trauma,

something that future generations have been forced to carry with them, irrespective of where they ended up in life.

The migrants from the erstwhile East Pakistan had hardly settled down In the following decades of Independence. Their naturalization and inclusion into the citizenry were not even complete and war broke out in East Pakistan in 1971, after the Bangladeshi Liberation Army waged armed rebellion against the West Pakistan dispensation. This meant the influx of a huge number of refugees into the Indian state of West Bengal. In the region of North Bengal, the post-1971, migrants, who began their lives as refugees were settled into the districts of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri. Questions regarding indigeneity and belonging soon got quite problematic as there were noticeable linguistic, ethnic and cultural differences between migrant population and the indigenous population, namely the Rajbanshi.

Self-histories are subjective accounts of protests and complaints against a perceived sense of injustice by forces that are far greater and powerful than yours, at least which is how self-histories pan out and manifest themselves in migrant sensibilities. The mythemes and beats of self-histories of East Bengali migrants, who are settled in Cooch Behar, are imbued with an over-arching aura of misery, abjection and self-rumination. Here the self-histories and accounts of personal loss and penury have mostly been expressed in the form of poetry by East Bengali migrants or their descendants.

In the following lines, Samar Sen, a Bengali poet who survived two world wars and the brutal Partition of the sub-continent, lists out how he was afflicted by the communal hatred, majoritarian violence and bi-partisan moral decay of contemporary urban living:

“Mrytuo hoito Mitali aane (Perhaps, death brings bliss and harmony)

Vabolila sango hole sobai saman (Everybody is equal once this mortal life ends)

Biharaer hindu aar Noakhalir Musalman (The Hindus of Bihar, the Hindus of Noakhali)

Noakhalir Hindu aar Biharer Musalman” (Are the same as the Hindus of Noakhali and the Muslims of Bihar) (From the poem “Janmodine” by Samar Sen)

Samar Sen talks about the middle class hypocrisy and the shameless mentality that enables profiteering, in his poem Seemanto (Border)

“Ghore Ghore grihini ra gaa dhoi (Matriarchs of each household wash themselves)

Aar gaa dhaka ondhokare ghorchhara baura chokite beparai dhoke (And the men who have been forced to abandon their households enter into unknown neighbourhoods)

Se ki jantrona ? se ki santona ? (Was that pain or was that consolation?)

Bipanno Shikhore ami daariye achi.” (I stand on an uncertain precipice)

Mangalacharan Chattopadhyay writes about the countless women who lost their husbands in the bloodshed and had to encounter a life full of uncertain anxiety and trepidation, in his poem “Eso dekhe jao” (Come, have a look)

“Eso dekhe jao kuti kuti sangsar (Have a look at all these distraught families)

Stationer platform chharano be-abru sangsare (Families that are forced to live on the platforms of railway stations)

Swami nei, gelo kothay toliye” (We don’t know where our husbands are, where they have disappeared)

The gendered nature of violence of the Partition and all its ramifications come out beautifully in the poems of Sen and Chattopadhyay. The notion of the motherland as an abject female body that has been brutalized by the ongoing cycle of bloodshed and violence is visible in these poems. This is how self-histories come out, not in shrieks of cry but in poetic renditions about life, loss, longing and love.

Biting and heartbreaking stuff of dislocation, loss and eventual loss come out blazingly in the poems of Purnendu Patri, who equates the province of Undivided Bengal to a mother-figure in his poem ‘Abhoman Vogni-Vrata’

Daine baaye dui dike dui bangal amar (My Bengal has been divided on left and right)

Apon Swajon dui maata (They are both my mothers)

Valobasar sakor upor paa tolmol tolmol (My feet shake and quiver on the bridge of Love and longing)

Paa baralei Padma nadi (My feet push me towards river Padma)

Haat baralei Padma pata ebar pabo (My hands stretch to pluck the lotus leaves)

The Partition ruined years of Hindu-Muslim goodwill, bonhomie and separated families and neighbours from each other forever, the misery of which is brought out in the following lines of Benu Datta-Ray’s “Kichu Kichu Katha” (Some Unspoken Words)

“Amina pisi bolechilo tahole chol li (Amina aunty was asking if we were really leaving for good)

Kono din ki aar dekha hobe (She wanted to know if we would ever meet again)

Amina pisike kaal rattire hotath swapne dekhlam kano je (I wonder why I saw her in my dream last night)

Tahole ki rakter vetore theke jaai katha?” (Or is it really true that our blood carries unspoken words?)

The events that unfolded in August 1947 were extremely harsh and brutal for common, working class Hindus and Muslims, who were dependent on their land to make ends meet. Communal segregation and division along the Radcliffe line did not work for them. They had no ways of ensuring the safety of their loved ones. The journey across the border, the completely idealistic

and foolhardy act of settling into a totally unknown land, was itself a leap of faith and when poets chronicle their pangs and sorrows, it becomes an act of faith. These poems are testaments of the violence that was unleashed in Aug. 1947. Sure, they are no substitute for the lived realities of the survivors of Partition, but they do a commendable job of conveying the gross atrocities and callous bloodshed that engulfed the sub-continent in the decades leading up to and following the Partition.

The Colours and Contours of Indigenous Culture in Rural North Bengal

The tenacity and the longevity of any indigenous culture of any particular geographical region or any distinct ethnic group is directly correlated with the political economy of that region and the extent to which that ethnic group participates and assimilates themselves into that political economy. The region of North Bengal is mostly rural, with smatterings of small-scale industries and plants spread out here and there. The landed gentry of this region were mostly formed by the local Rajbanshi people who had to give up a sizeable portion of their landholdings due to the Land Reforms Act of 1953.

This meant that that most of the feudal elites of the community soon had to become farming families due to their diminished land holdings. The Kshatriyazation of the Rajbanshis did not necessarily improve their material conditions and the growing economic gulf between the Rajbanshis and the East Bengali Migrant population, who soon acquired public sector jobs and also proved their entrepreneurial skills, imbued the local population with a perceived sense of loss and deprivation. This alchemy of disillusionment and detachment from the political economy of the region, coupled with a sense of historical injustice, has shaped the growth and production of native cultural artifacts in the region of North Bengal, that are at once colourful and convoluted.

It is hard job, trying to catalogue the various connotations and focalizations of the Indigenous culture and its multitude of cultural artifacts in North Bengal. Centuries of agricultural economy and a pantheistic understanding of nature have shaped the artistic consciousness of the practitioners, participants and performers. One has to be careful not to make gross generalizations and wild assumptions. However, a detailed study of the region's indigenous culture makes it possible for us to come up with the following observations:

- The Baul tradition of North Bengal is syncretic and pluralistic. It fuses the Vaishnavite Philosophy with the deeply spiritual outlook of Sufi Order. The bauls completely forsake the

ritualistic and scriptural traditions of the mainstream Hindu faith. Their outlook towards life is informed by pantheism and animistic devotion. There is no caste differences among the Bauls, but two different strains of practice can be observed, namely the Sahajiya tradition (mostly practiced by Hindu Bauls) and Auliya Faqir Bauls (mostly practiced by Muslim bauls). Dr. Shashibhushan Das refers to the Baul tradition as “the most perfect form of human love”.

- The hallmark of any indigenous culture and its people is to have tangible articles and objects of faith and distinct belief systems that set them apart from the mainstream society at large. The ritual of Sonarai Puja practiced by the local Rajbanshi population is one such instance. Community elders say that Sonarai is an avatar of Lord Vishnu and he is one of three brothers and he gets worshipped as a form of tiger-deity. The following couplet brings out the rationale behind the worship of Sonarai-

Sona Rai koi (Sona Rai tells)

Rupa Rai bhai (His brother Rupa Rai)

Chalo amra tinjon mili narer puja khai (“Let us three brothers go and get worshipped by measly mortals”)

This brings out the old and archaic nature of this ritual.

Tukhya Gaan is yet another proud and age old musical tradition of North Bengal and can be found well and thriving in the districts of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Alipur. It blends the spiritual traditions of Vaishnavite Body-Mysticism and the Psychological teachings of Scriptural Hinduism. Birendronath Ray says that Tukhya is derived from the Sanskrit word Tushti, meaning content, satisfaction, this can be gauged from the following popular couplet of a Tukhya song:

“Ei manushe aache re mon

Sare bole manush ratan”

(The mind of man is his greatest possession

We call that ‘uncut gem’)

- The Bhawaiya song genre of North Bengal is one of the most proud and vividly dynamic musical traditions of North Bengal. It forms a significant part of the anthologies of Bengali folk literature in many publications. The Bhawaiya song genre is informed by a deep ecological concern, reverence towards nature, pantheism and rural-agricultural sensibilities. Eco-feminist readings can also be done on the rich Bhawaiya tradition and it can yield pertinent answers

regarding the ethno-culture of Cooch Behar district and the region of North Bengal at large. This makes Bhawaiya songs a perfect case study of the cultural landscape of North Bengal.

- The notion of indigeneity and belonging is further expanded when we take into account the fact that there are plenty of tribal languages such as Sadri, Dhimal and Toto spoken all around North Bengal. We have a healthy smattering of such linguistic groups here in the Cooch Behar district, a phenomenon that can be attributed to the historic presence of various tribes in this district alongside the Rajbanshi population.

So it is safe to assume that the indigenous cultures of Cooch Behar and North Bengal are alive and well. In fact we can come to the following conclusions:

- North Bengal is not a monolith and its people are extremely dexterous in preserving their inherited culture.
- The ideas of syncretism and pluralism are visible and continuing gloriously in the Baul tradition: both in the Sahajiya and the Faqir-Auliya orders.
- The histories and the reasons behind the emergence of such indigenous cultures are varied and they defy categorization.
- The folk musical traditions of Baul and Tukhya have borrowed heavily from the scriptural Hindu practices and they carry within themselves the core beliefs of Vaishnavite philosophy.
- Religion is tweaked in favour of subjective interpretation and local variations, which makes it all the more approachable to the masses and it gets reflected in the cultural artifacts.
- Contemporary attitudes regarding these indigenous cultures and cultural artifacts are hopefully neither revisionist nor mixed with gleeful nostalgia, which makes it possible for the performers to stay relevant and always in demand.
- The folk theaters of this region are not stagnant products, they are deeply embossed in the psyche of the local people, as evidenced in the continued relevance of Bishohari Puja, Saitol Puja and Kushan Geet.

Conclusion

All these are the ugly manifestations of a border crisis that could have easily been avoided in 1947. The Radcliffe Line is nothing more than a Cartographic Catastrophe. Too many people in North Bengal have suffered because of the indiscretion of an incompetent Englishman and

the Indian Republic have hardly risen to the occasion and provided any meaningful and long-lasting solutions to ease the afflictions of the survivors of Partition. It remains a blot on the socialist democratic ethos of India and the region of North Bengal has paid dearly because of it.

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